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Montana Defiantly Puts Yellowstone Wolves In Its Crosshairs

IN UNPRECEDENTED MOVE, NEW HUNTING AND TRAPPING REGULATIONS WOULD
ALLOW EVERY WOLF COMING INTO STATE FROM AMERICA'S FIRST NATIONAL PARK
TO BE KILLED AS A TROPHY

by **Todd Wilkinson**



Photo by Jacob W. Frank/NPS; graphic element added by Gus O'Keefe

By Todd Wilkinson



Wolves of the Rockies
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For the first autumn in 27 years, the most famous population of wild wolves in the world has essentially no protection when members of its packs wander across the invisible boundary of Yellowstone National Park into Montana.

Montana's controversial new wolf management laws, designed to reduce wolf numbers in the state to the lowest level they can be without triggering a return to federal protection under the Endangered Species Act, come into sharpest focus perhaps on the northern edge of America's first national park.

Any wolf that lives most of its life in Yellowstone and crosses the boundary into Montana can be killed beginning this month. Especially vulnerable are members of the renowned Junction Butte Pack that has enthralled millions of wolf watchers in the vicinity of Yellowstone's Lamar Valley over the years. Irony, scientists say, is that the very tolerance wolves have developed toward people within the sanctuary of Yellowstone could lead to their easy demise for hunters in Montana waiting to draw them within view of a rifle scope.

Normally, the total allowable annual wolf quota for hunters and trappers to kill wolves in a pair of hunting districts bordering Yellowstone—district 313 near Gardiner and 316 near Cooke City—is one in each district. But under new regulations now in place, the quotas no longer exist and an unlimited number of wolves can be shot or trapped using baits on private property and spotlights to stalk them at night. Similarly, quotas have been dropped in hunting districts bordering Glacier National Park in the northern part of the state near the US-Canada border.

The new law allows for an individual hunter or trapper to kill up to 10 wolves apiece. Although it's not likely to happen, just half a dozen hunters and trappers, could, if enough Yellowstone wolves trotted into Montana, bag their legal limit and reduce the park wolf population by 50 percent. Even if they netted only a percentage of that, it could cause mayhem in the social pack structures of Yellowstone lobos, scientists say.

"Montana is hellbent on erasing one of the greatest wildlife conservation success stories in the history of this country and its liberalized wolf-killing policies allowed to exist literally on the doorstep of Yellowstone are a disgrace," says former Yellowstone Superintendent Michael V. Finley. "What this does is put wolves, which people come from around the world to see in Yellowstone—and I should note spend money in Montana—in peril. It's not only wanton waste



REMOVE A PACK A DAY

and morally and ethically reprehensible but it could also destroy decades of valuable scientific research into these animals.”

SMOKE A PACK A DAY

A bumper sticker often seen on pickups in rural areas of the Northern Rockies

Outrage to the state wolf-killing policies put in place this year focusses not just on Montana, but has also been directed to Idaho and the Midwestern state of Wisconsin. It has hastened calls from environmentalists, prominent independent scientists, nature-tourism operators and citizens to have US Interior Secretary Deb Haaland use her power to immediately “relist” wolves, i.e. put them back under the protection of the Endangered Species Act.

Haaland, as President Joe Biden’s top public land manager who oversees national parks, has so far not intervened. Moreover, the Biden Administration has refused to halt plans put in place by the Trump Administration to remove all federal protections for wolves across the Lower 48.

However, the former national director of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, which orchestrated wolf recovery in the Lower 48, says that urgent action is needed. Dan Ashe told *Mountain Journal* what he also echoed in an opinion piece he wrote for *The Washington Post*, that laws in Montana and Idaho represent a grave threat to the biological integrity of the species’ recovery. “This is not wildlife management,” he said. “it’s ecocide.”

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Wolves by the middle of the 19th century were annihilated from most of the Lower 48. Even in Yellowstone the government aided trappers in achieving total extermination of wolves in the park during the 1920s. Some 31 wolves, captured in Canada, were reintroduced to Yellowstone and 35 to wilderness areas in Idaho during the winters of 1995 and 1996. Since then their numbers have grown and they have expanded their range, with wolves recolonizing Washington State, Oregon and California following an absence of more than 50 years. It’s been called one of the greatest wildlife conservation success stories in history and a model for other countries.

A growing chorus of wildlife advocates say that triumph is on the cusp of being reversed.

The new wolf-control codes in both Montana and neighboring Idaho allow for use of neck-squeezing snares to catch wolves and strangle them to death. Snare use is forbidden within federal grizzly bear recovery zones in both states because grizzlies still are federally protected. However, beyond those relatively small zones, snaring is allowed on both public and private land. In addition to snaring, which is outlawed in many states because of lethal threats posed to non-target species, including pet dogs and imperiled animals such as

wolverines and Canada lynx, Montana and Idaho also allow for controversial wolf baiting, that is banned in many states because it is considered a violation of fair-chase hunting practices. And wolf hunters can use bright spotlights, using a technique known as “shining,” to hunt lobos at night on private land with use of high-tech insert-red goggles and scopes. Again, shining is banned in most states.

The general wolf hunting season in Montana commences Sept. 15 and the trapping season begins on Nov. 29 but will be delayed in grizzly bear recovery zones until December when bears den. Both season run through March 15, 2022.

The main instigators of anti-wolf bills in Montana were Paul Fielder, a member of the Montana House of Representatives and Sen. Bob Brown. Both are from Thompson Falls located in the far northwestern corner of the state. Fielder is husband to former state senator Jennifer Fielder who won a seat on the Montana Public Service Commission in the November 2020 election. Mrs. Fielder is best known for her radical views, including promoting the idea that federal lands ought to be transferred into state management.

The Fielders are close friends of Thompson Falls realtor Glenn Schenaver, affiliated with the Foundation for Wildlife Management formed with a singular mission of lethally controlling wolves. Foundation for Wildlife Management created an expensive reimbursement fund in Idaho that covers the costs of hunters and trappers who kill wolves. Critics have called it a de-facto bounty program. Sen. Brown drafted a bill that authorizes a reimbursement program in Montana nearly identical to Idaho's; it passed and **Gianforte signed it into law.**



A photo of the famous Junction Butte Pack in Yellowstone, one of the most watched and beloved by visitors in Yellowstone National Park. And a pack, experts say, that would be extremely vulnerable to hunters and trappers since members often wander to and fro across the park boundary into Montana. Photo courtesy Neal Herbert/NPS with graphic additions by Gus O'Keefe

Patrick Flowers, a state senator, served for several years as the regional director for Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks in the southwest corner of the state that surrounds Bozeman and abuts Yellowstone. He says the legislature has created problems—and lit a controversy—that didn't need to happen.

“There was an argument made about impacts on big game populations in northwest Montana. If you accept the premise, and I don't, then you would think the logical strategy would be to address it in northwest Montana,” he said. “But the bills they passed didn't do that. It is overreaching and seeks to reduce wolf populations across the state. When it comes to a place like Yellowstone, I don't see a need for what is being prescribed.” (*MoJo* readers can peruse the state's autumn 2021 big game hunting forecast [by clicking here](#)).

Flowers says it seems the clear intent was to carry the agenda of Foundation for Wildlife Management and other anti-wolf groups. He witnessed firsthand when Montana and Fish Wildlife and Parks took a beating in the national media after it enlisted hunters in the 1990s to be participants in gunning down of Yellowstone bison coming into the state. Eventually, management over bison got stripped away from Fish Wildlife and Parks and was handed over to the Department of Agriculture, which continues to falsely claim that bison represent the eminent risk of passing the disease brucellosis to domestic cattle herds in the state. In fact a study by the National Academies of Sciences resoundingly refutes it, saying that elk represent the primary threat in wildlife to livestock disease transmission.

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At a contentious Fish and Wildlife Commission meeting in July, an incredulous Patrick Byorth demanded to see evidence from his colleagues to justify what they were pushing through. They produced little. “It appeared that they knew what was going to happen before the meeting even started. I asked if they had a pre-meeting without me being present and one of them said they had been getting together two or three at a time to decide what they were going to do,” Byorth told *Mountain Journal*.

Byorth is an attorney in Bozeman, former fisheries biologist with Fish Wildlife and Parks and a senior staffer with Trout Unlimited in Montana. He is the only sitting commissioner not appointed by Gianforte and by dint of a fluke had his appointed term carry over from the previous administration of Gov. Steve Bullock, a Democrat. He and fellow commissioner K.C. Walsh, a Gianforte appointee and best known for being the owner of Simms Fishing Products, an international manufacturer of high quality fishing waders, both voted against adopting

the controversial new approaches to wolf management, citing concerns about their ethics, but lost in a 3-2 vote.

“We’ve got people in northwest Montana who hate wolves and now the legislature and the governor have pandered to them. They say, ‘Now that we’re killing the heck out of wolves there’s going to miraculously be so many elk you can shoot them right off the road.’ Well, elk biology is more complicated than that. One of the big drivers is declining habitat. I would note that if you look at the numbers, the elk population is actually fairly stable in Region 1,” Byorth said.

Baiting wildlife, hunting animals at night when they are more vulnerable using shining and infrared goggles, and promoting indiscriminate killing with snares. All of these are things that the Boone and Crockett Club, an organization founded by Theodore Roosevelt, in the past has identified as being inconsistent with the ethics of fair chase, he noted. Boone & Crockett defines fair chase as “the ethical, sportsmanlike, and lawful pursuit and taking of any free-ranging wild game animal in a manner that does not give the hunter an improper or unfair advantage over the game animals.”

Fair chase is “the ethical, sportsmanlike, and lawful pursuit and taking of any free-ranging wild game animal in a manner that does not give the hunter an improper or unfair advantage over the game animals.” —Boone & Crockett Club

Where does that get murky? The Idaho Fish and Game Commission has restricted putting out bait and salt for deer and elk and in a statement about baiting said: “this type of hunting clearly violates fair chase ethics because it takes advantage of an unnatural condition created by the hunter. Pursuing an animal in its natural environment and overcoming its senses is referred to as fair chase. This concept is the basis for many fish and game laws.” Yet Idaho allows baiting of both wolves and black bears, which also causes animals to get hooked on unnatural human foods often used. Byorth also pointed to the widely-condemned practiced of spotlighting, or shining, wolves at night.

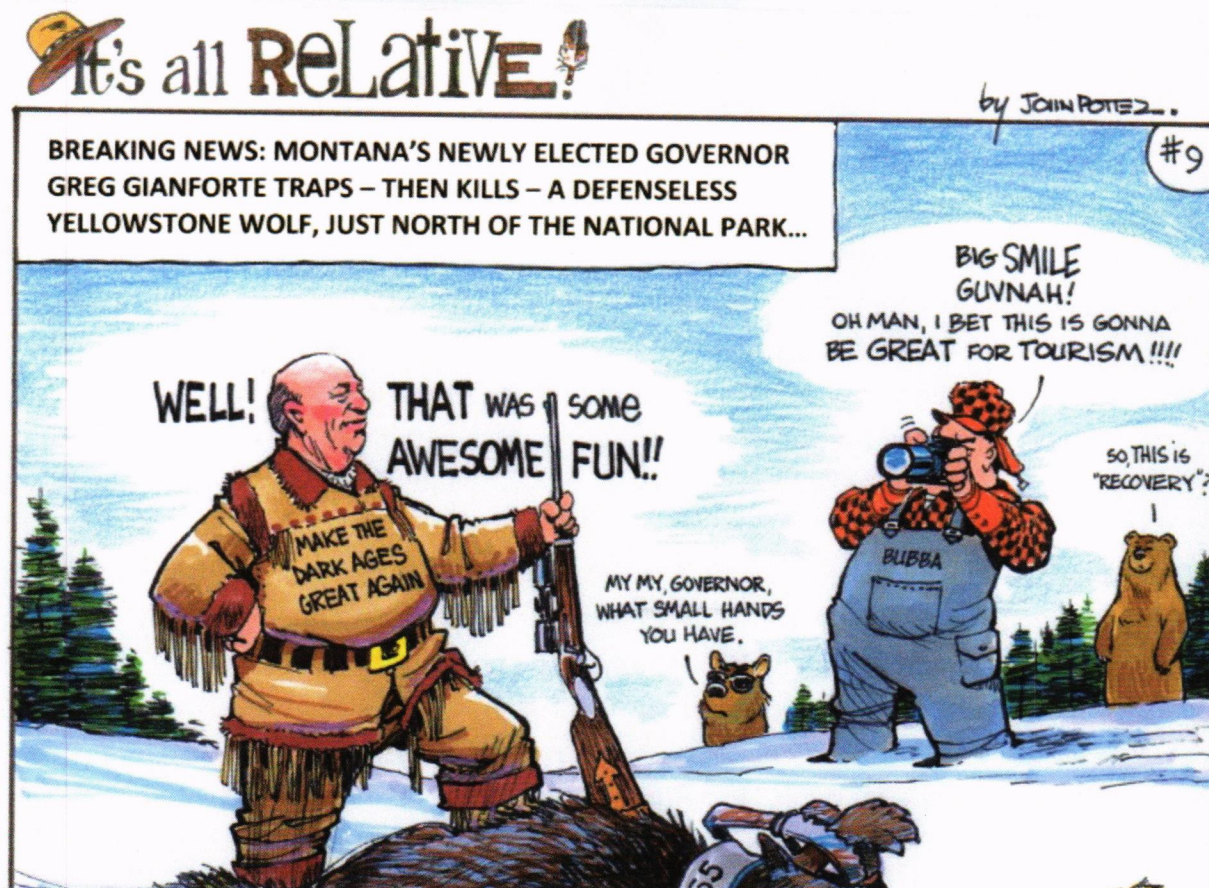
“I’d like *Mountain Journal* readers to think about something. If a rancher is driving across his or her land and sees a spotlight, will they think it’s someone out poaching and then call the

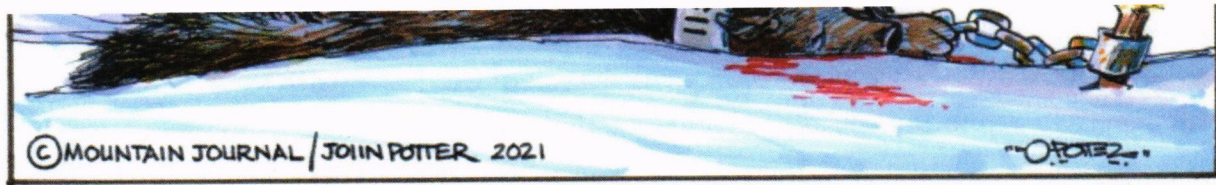
game warden? It used to be easy to identify the bad guys because night shining of wildlife was illegal but these new wolf laws have opened a can of worms,” Byorth said. “The state has given license to a notorious poaching technique that will make it much harder for game wardens to protect wildlife.”

The late legendary Montana sportsman Jim Posewitz, who published a book, *Beyond Fair Chase*, about hunting ethics given free to every young person going through hunter safety, warned before his death that society was in a backslide—and that the honorable tradition of hunting isn’t an activity captive to the interests of any one partisan ideology

In their rhetoric, Fielder and others often speak with ambiguity about ethics. And they present not only wildly embellished assertions about the impacts of wolves on big game and livestock but they misinterpret—and thereby misrepresent—the arguments surrounding what biological recovery of a species means.

During the 1990s, population thresholds set by the US Fish and Wildlife Service as the lowest yardstick to achieve biological recovery was 150 wolves embodying 15 different packs in each of the three Northern Rockies states. An important nuance is that the figure was never intended to be a total population target in each state, but a bare minimum allowing removing of the species from federal protection.





A cartoon by artist John Potter that appeared shortly after it was announced that Gov. Gianforte had trapped and shot a Yellowstone wolf that roamed beyond the park into Paradise Valley, Montana. Of note is that Potter was present in 1995 and oversaw traditional indigenous prayer ceremony welcoming wolves back to the park after a 60-year absence.

“That’s different from having a robust, healthy, self-sustaining macro-population of wolves that is the very definition of recovery under the law,” says Mike Phillips, a career biologist who oversaw reintroduction in Yellowstone and today serves as a director of the Turner Endangered Species Fund. Phillips also served two decades as an elected member of both the Montana state senate and house.

In recent years, rough estimates have been of around 2,000 wolves in the three Northern Rockies states and while that number is a lot compared to almost zero in the 1990s, the telltale gauge is impact on big game, domestic livestock and rancher and hunting guide livelihoods. In every one of those categories, wolf impacts overall have been nominal and where there have been impacts, especially to ranchers, wolves often have been dealt with swiftly and lethally. Far more wolves have been destroyed than the number of livestock they’ve preyed upon.

Phillips says wolf recovery has, all in all, been an undeniable success but what it hasn’t overcome is age-old biases brought to this continent by Europeans.

“Let’s all of us step forward and take a bow and celebrate that by coming together in a spirit of cooperation we made it happen. What we’ve had in the Northern Rockies with wolves is a success. The federal government and the states had done an excellent job of managing wolves and being very aggressive in taking action to reduce conflicts with livestock. It was working well. And I should also note, hundreds of wolves have been killed by hunters, trappers and to resolve potential conflicts in Montana and Idaho each year,” he added. “All of the worst-case scenarios that ranchers and hunters claimed would happen with cattle, sheep and big game haven’t happened. The stories spun by legislators in Idaho and Montana are myths.”

Phillips says there’s no professional wildlife management entity in the world that would argue the goal of recovering a species is to keep populations of that animal or plant suppressed to their lowest acceptable minimums, as Idaho, Montana and Wyoming have done. Having more of a recovered species improves the prospects of their survival, their ecological resiliency and, most of all, does not represent an overwhelming burden on people who share the landscape with them. “Imagine,” he said, “if we applied this logic to bald eagles and set out shooting them to keep their populations at their lowest legal levels possible

because eagles might be killing somebody's lambs or taking fish from somebody's backyard trout ponds."

Norman Bishop, who spent his career as a scientific interpreter for the National Park Service and attended hundreds of public meetings presenting facts about wolves, wrote an essay in *Mountain Journal* titled **25 Years of Re-living With Wolves in Yellowstone** and in it he addresses what he calls "distortions of truth" relating to wolves, livestock depredation, elk numbers, and hunting success rates in the Northern Rockies. *Mountain Journal* has fact-checked Bishop's numbers and, objectively, it can be stated they convincingly refute the arguments Fielder and others made to move their legislation through the Montana house and senate to the desk of Gov. Gianforte.

Worth mentioning is that during the winter of 2021 Gov. Gianforte trapped and killed a radio-collared wolf in Paradise Valley, Montana that was part of ongoing research in Yellowstone and had wandered outside the park. Gianforte also has a reputation for exaggerating natural history.

Not long ago, Gianforte mentioned to a colleague that a citizen from Gardiner, Montana—the oldest gateway town to Yellowstone—told him three dozen wolves had passed across the person's property and that lobos were out of control and needed to be managed also to protect people and pets. Readers who may take the governor's remark at face value need to realize that such an incident has never happened—though there is the threat *is real* that over time dozens of wolves could die the moment they pass over Yellowstone's invisible boundary into Montana is real. For years, reports have circulated in saloons about residents of the Gardiner Valley and Upper Yellowstone River Valley near the national proudly poaching wolves and specifically targeting lobos with radio collars.





This rare 12-year-old white female wolf, member of Yellowstone's Canyon Pack, was shot in 2017 and wounded by a poacher. After park officials reached her, she was in shock and had to be euthanized because of the severity of the wound. Today there remains a huge reward waiting for anyone who provides information leading to the arrest and conviction of the poacher. Photo courtesy Neal Herbert/NPS

In response to Montana's wolf-reduction laws, the state received 26,000 comments, 90 percent of which opposed the new liberalized killing policies. Of the 1,000 or so comments submitted by residents of Montana, more than half were against what the state is implementing. (*MoJo* readers can peruse them all [by clicking here](#)).

Gianforte has told colleagues that he doesn't care if out of staters are upset about his wolf policies because he only cares what Montanans think—and he is convinced that they don't like wolves.

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Millions of people around the world, of all ages, consider themselves to be Yellowstone wolf groupies, and their faithful are as devoted park advocates as any he has seen, says Yellowstone Supt. Cam Sholly. He's disappointed with how recent events have transpired.

Sholly noted that he enjoys and works hard at maintaining a courteous relationship with not only Gianforte but the other two governors from Yellowstone border states. "Greg and I have an open and honest relationship and I have directly engaged with him over the past weeks to determine how we may work together to mitigate impacts of recent statewide wolf hunting and trapping changes on the Yellowstone wolf population," he explained

Never once was he or any members of his resource staff contacted by Fish Wildlife and Parks to warn them of what was coming. Sholly admits to being caught off guard when he learned that soon it will be legal for all wolves moving from Yellowstone into Montana to be killed. He reached out to Gianforte, he said, and has expressed a number of concerns. Chief among them is getting wolf-kill quotas restored in hunting districts 313 and 316.

"This isn't me trying to tell Montana how they should manage wildlife. And this doesn't have to be a state versus federal government issue. Ultimately, the wildlife management decisions we make in Yellowstone can affect Montana, Wyoming and Idaho," he said. "Dialogue and collaboration are essential if we're going to succeed in achieving transboundary wildlife conservation objectives, whether that be with wolves, grizzlies, bison, elk or any other

species that transcends the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.”

Regarding Montana’s maneuverings on wolves without consulting Yellowstone, he drew an analogy to differences of opinions that exist for how Yellowstone ought to deal with record-shattering visitation and crowding issues. Yellowstone does not exist in isolation from the three states that portions of the national park covers and neither does what the three states do not impact the ecological integrity of America’s first national park.

“While Yellowstone is responsible for managing visitation in the park, we wouldn’t make unilateral decisions on capping visitation, as an example, without thoughtful engagement with partners, including states,” Sholly said. “We understand that decisions we make have major impacts on local communities, counties, and state economies. Similarly, wildlife management decisions, at least as they pertain to the Greater Yellowstone, should be made with recognition and acknowledgement of potential cross boundary impacts.”



Yellowstone Park Superintendent Cam Sholly. Photo courtesy Jacob W. Frank/NPS

With Yellowstone approaching its 150th birthday in 2020, it’s a perfect time, he says, to reflect on how thoughtless human behavior nearly exterminated a number of species, including eradicating wolves inside the park itself. Yellowstone also provided sanctuary to two dozen bison that survived the slaughter of tens of millions, the descendants today considered holy to indigenous people. And it wasn’t so long ago that grizzlies begged for food and went dumpster diving

because human ignorance set the stage for it to happen.

“We’ve come a long way over the past four decades at putting the pieces back together after some of the worst wildlife conservation decision making in our country’s history. And whether your focus is conservation, recreation, economics, or other beneficial assets of Greater Yellowstone, it’s in our mutual interests to make decisions that strengthen, not weaken, this ecosystem,” Sholly said. “If there is one thing we’ve learned over the past century it’s that major impacts to one species in this ecosystem can have wide ranging effects on many other aspects of the ecosystem.”

"If there is one thing we've learned over the past century it's that major impacts to one species in this ecosystem can have wide ranging effects on many other aspects of the ecosystem." —Yellowstone Supt. Cam Sholly

While not critiquing the statewide wolf reduction strategy in Montana he did say Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks did not use the best available data, science and information to fully assess the negative impact on Yellowstone. “Lifting quotas in these units, allowing baiting, which could lure wolves out of the park, is reckless and potentially poses a serious threat to wolves in Yellowstone’s northern range,” he said, noting that he asked Gianforte to re-evaluate and modify how wolves are allowed to be destroyed. “Fish Wildlife and Parks don’t have any idea how many wolves are in hunting districts 313 and 316, so how can it sanction unlimited harvest?”

Another issue of contention involves baiting. Sholly has told Gianforte that it’s problematic for a number of reasons, including drawing in grizzlies, habituating animals and it goes against the lessons being taught to millions of people about responsible food storage. The governor replied to Sholly saying baiting is allowed only on private land. About 3.2 percent of Yellowstone that falls within Montana fronts private land. However, Sholly noted, 33.5 percent of terrain found at the transboundary intersection of Yellowstone and Montana resides within a mile of private land, meaning that baiting could easily lure animals out of the park.

"Lifting quotas in these units, allowing baiting, which could lure wolves out of the park, is reckless and potentially poses a serious threat to wolves in Yellowstone's northern range." —Cam Sholly.

Montana's aggressive strategy to kill Yellowstone wolves does not benefit the state and it has reportedly caused consternation from Wyoming. Knocking down Yellowstone's wolf population does not advance the state's goal of lowering the number of wolves overall in Montana because technically park lobos are considered part of Wyoming's total wolf count.

Moreover, wolves in some ways could be construed as allies to Montana ranchers concerned about wandering Yellowstone bison. Sholly pointed out that Montana livestock officials have long complained of too many bison being in Yellowstone. He noted that wolves have begun preying on bison with increasing regularity—so much so that in recent years bison comprise 40 percent of a park wolf's winter diet.

Montana's governor has never allowed himself to be questioned about how his portrayals of wolf impacts does not align with scientific and economic data. A call was made to Gianforte's office by *Mountain Journal* to request an interview with the governor, but it went unanswered. A call was placed to Fish Wildlife and Parks Director Hank Worsech and was steered instead to department spokesman Greg Lemon.

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Naturalist Rick McIntyre, who has spent more time watching Yellowstone wolves than any other living person, spent decades explaining wolf behavior to visitors for the Park Service and in recent years has **won awards and acclaim** for three books that chronicle the natural history dramas that play out within packs and between rivals.

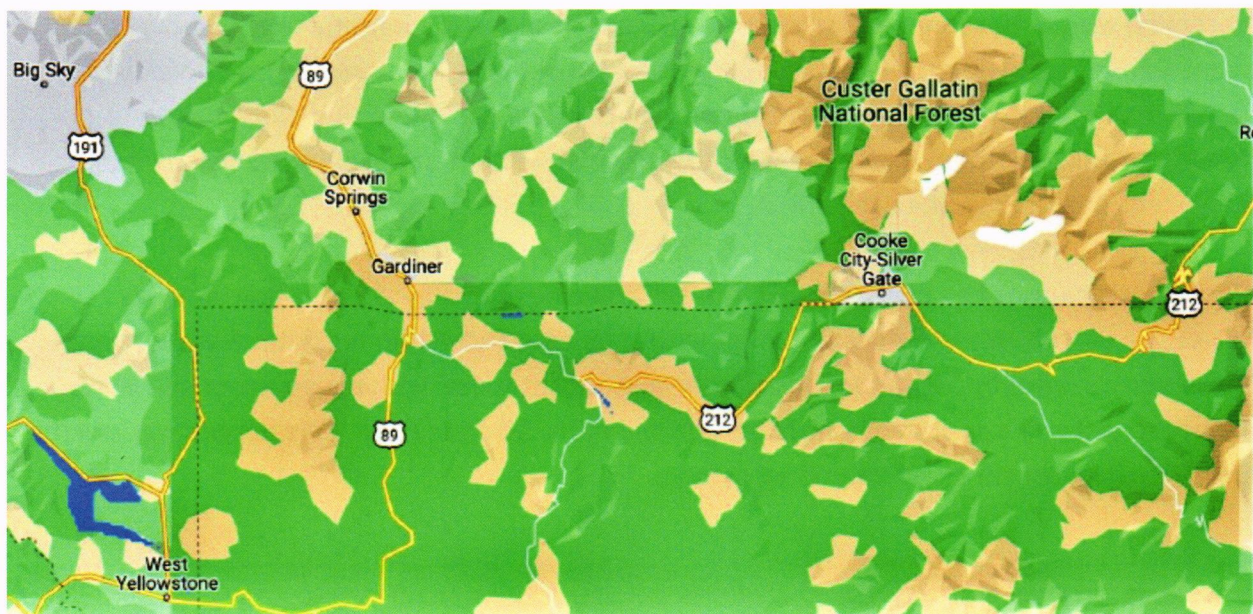
McIntyre said a primary concern is the welfare of the Junction Butte Pack which every spring for years has dened in Slough Creek, with excellent wolf watching available from the campground road. "You routinely see adults and pups there, the whole pack taking part, playing and interacting. It might be a mother nursing her pups or a father wolf bringing in food," he explained. "There could easily be several hundred people hoping to catch a glimpse.

It would be hard to imagine a wildlife viewing opportunity anywhere in the world as spectacular as that.”

Wolf watching is an emotional experience for many, an activity that is a highlight of their lives. “We’ve had people in wheelchairs, people dying of cancer and wanting to see it just once and a woman with traumatic brain injury that described it as one of the greatest moments she ever had,” McIntyre said.

Slough Creek isn’t far from the northern border of the park and when wolves set out on the move in winter, sometimes trailing elk and bison, they can cover the couple of mile distance between safety in Yellowstone and danger in Montana in an hour. In 2020, the state Fish and Wildlife Commission lowered the quota for wolf kills in hunting districts adjacent the park to just one from two.

Perhaps surprising to some is that McIntyre doesn’t blanch at the possibility of some wolves, a small number, being hunted.



Especially perilous for wandering wolves are areas near Gardiner and Cooke City, Montana. The state has removed quotas for wolf hunting and trapping in two hunting districts located in those locales. Two years ago the quota was two wolves apiece in each district. That was reduced to a one-wolf quota last year. Now, as a result of new laws, the quota is gone, meaning there is no limit to how many can be shot or trapped when they cross out of the park into the state.

“I was around here before the reintroduction and part of the deal was that if wolves were brought back then at some point, after delisting occurred, there would be some level of hunting and trapping. I have no problem in keeping that deal so long as there is a limit,” he said, noting that a few years back the quota was 12 wolves in district 313 but it got scaled back, pared down to two in 2019 and one last year.

One famous Gardiner, Montana-based hunting outfitter, Hell's A Roarin' Outfitters, owned by Warren and Sue Johnson, boasts that satisfied clients have returned for decades—ostensibly pleased to have taken elk. On Hell's A Roarin's website, it reads: "We live and hunt just North of Yellowstone National Park. Many outfitters come here to fill their personal tags! We have been in business for over 30 years and our clients from my first year are still returning, year after year, My hunters have taken close to 2,000 bull elk along with numerous deer, bear, goat, moose, mountain lion, buffalo and sheep with Hell's A-Roarín'. Remember, the rewards of choosing quality and excellence are not to be underestimated!"

That would suggest wolves do not, and have not represented a major threat to their business which spans private and public land. Guided hunts outside the park have been a significant contributor to the local economy and Yellowstone, as a vital provider of habitat for wildlife, has been a kind neighbor.

Not long ago, McIntyre built upon a calculation of the value of wolf watching as a driver for economic activity, originally calculated two decades ago and estimated at tens of millions of dollars. Amid record visitation, the popularity of guided wolf watching tours and interest that has gone global, he and others pen the annual sustained value of between \$60 million and \$70 million annually. It dwarfs the amount of money generated through elk hunting and livestock production in the Gardiner Basin/ Upper Yellowstone Valley.

The mystique of seeing wolves is also part of a nature-tourism industry that annually generates about \$1.5 billion in economic activity for the tri-state region and 15,000 jobs from just tourism to Yellowstone and Grand Teton parks alone. The top three attractions to wolves and bears with Old Faithful Geyser in third place.

Like McIntyre, Supt. Sholly says the special, delicate opportunity that has evolved with Yellowstone wolves needs to be safeguarded and he worries about it being shattered by those outside the park who have not considered the consequences. "While wolves have remained extremely wild in Yellowstone, those on the northern range are tolerant to people watching them from a distance, making them extremely vulnerable when they leave the park," he said. "On one side of the boundary they're being watched through a spotting scope and on the other side, they're being watched through a rifle scope.

If a pack like Junction Butte were to move together, it could be wiped out, dramatically depleted or leaving wounded animals in a single afternoon.

Nathan Varley, who operates Yellowstone Wolf Tracker with his wife, Linda Thurston, and few employees, says there's been a palpable worry about not only the future of wolves but the impact it could have on companies like his. "Were you to string together a number of years

with a heavy harvest I would see there being significant consequences,” he explained. “Plus, if wolf packs get shot at they get averse to making themselves visually available for viewing. Having a hunted wolf population does not make for a good watchable population. Hunted wolves, if they see you from a half mile away they will leave.”

Every wolf in Yellowstone is exponentially worth more alive than dead economically and will provide thrills for thousands, year after year, as opposed to a single hunter or trapper who can kill eight wolves and be left disappointed that they didn't fill their full 10-wolf quota. Do the math, analyze the contrast and decide where your personal values come down. — Yellowstone wolf watching guide Nathan Varley

The son of Yellowstone's former chief scientist John Varley and the park's former visitor service's director, Anita Varley, Nathan and his wife were among a sizeable number of Montanans who submitted comments to the Fish Wildlife and Parks and said it appears the wildlife commissioners didn't even read them. “I'm not sure those who voted to end the quotas realize how special this is,” he noted. “After the commission made its vote, it felt like we had gone backward a dozen years with our advocacy work. All of the progress erased based on people with negative biases toward wolves that have little to do with fact.”

Every wolf in Yellowstone is exponentially worth more alive than dead economically and will provide thrills for thousands, year after year, as opposed to a single hunter or trapper who can kill eight wolves and be left disappointed that they didn't fill their full 10-wolf quota, Varley says. He encourages *Mountain Journal* readers to do the math, analyze the contrast and decide where their personal values come down.

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When he oversaw the Fish and Wildlife Service, Dan Ashe put faith in the state's commitment to manage wolves with honor and decency. He said the tenor of politics in the Northern Rockies has radically changed and he recalls the deals struck with Wyoming, Montana and Idaho to move delisting of wolves forward. "Back when Virgil Moore was running Idaho Fish and Game, he had to respond to the state fish and game commission which was responding to citizens saying things about wolves that were at best, false," Ashe recalls. "He and I would get together and talk about the need to have safeguards in place to protect the biological integrity of the wolf population and he would say, 'You are making my life very difficult.' To his credit, he maintained a balance and he believed in science. He also got fired. Well, maybe he was ready to retire, or maybe he was strongly encouraged to retire."

Ashe says the semblance of balance has evaporated in Idaho and Montana. "What has happened in Idaho and is on the cusp of happening in Montana appears to be a violation of the agreement those states struck with the Fish and Wildlife Service to get wolves delisted," Ashe says. "States are not operating according to the promise they would professionally manage wolves as trophy game animals or even with the respect given to regular game animals. Instead, wolves are being treated as vermin and there's been a complete deterioration of the stands of wildlife management those states pledged to uphold."

Ashe added, "It's the same thing in Wisconsin. This isn't about wolves. It's just politics. People want to be mad at the federal government and wolves have become their abused dog to kick and they are kicking it hard." In 2021, hunters in Wisconsin exceeded established wolf quotas by 83 percent before the state had to abruptly shut down the season and a study shows that **wolf poaching** appears to be a serious problem.

With regard to Wyoming, Ashe used to defend the fact that Wyoming today legally classifies wolves over 85 percent of the state as a "predator" which is a euphemism for vermin. Outside of the small northwest corner of Wyoming where Yellowstone and Grand Teton national parks reside and where wolf hunting is not allowed inside them, Wyoming allows wolves to be killed at any hour of the day, any day of the year, and by virtually any means, except for dispensing outlawed poisons. Wolves can be deliberately run over with an ATV or have gas poured into dens with mother wolves and her pups inside and then set alight.

Apart from new controversial laws in Montana and Idaho that would allow the killing of most wolves in those

states, Wisconsin allows wolves to be chased by dogs and provides compensation if dogs get killed by wolves. In Wyoming, wolves can be killed 24 hours a day, 365 days a year in about 85 percent of the state using almost any killing means available. Pups can even be killed in their dens.

In the history of the Endangered Species Act, no animal that Americans have invested in its biological recovery has been allowed to be treated that way after its management is relinquished from the federal government and given back to a state. “If I have a regret, it’s that we didn’t insist that Wyoming treat wolves as a game animal across the entire state,” Ashe said. This isn’t the first time that Ashe re-considered his support for state wildlife agencies and formerly defending them by saying they were up to the task of professionally managing species.

A few years ago, he called out Alaska after the state approved the shooting of grizzly bears over bait, killing mother bears and their cubs, gunning bears and wolves from planes and even killing wolves and pups in their dens. It’s worth noting that during his tenure at the Fish and Wildlife Service, Mr. Ashe did allow Wyoming, as part of the agreement that gave wolf management back to the state, to enact a policy that allows what he condemned above to happen with wolves in over 85 percent of the state.

“Over the past several years, the Alaska Board of Game has unleashed a withering attack on bears and wolves that is wholly at odds with America’s long tradition of ethical, sportsmanlike, fair-chase hunting,” Ashe wrote. “We have a long history of cooperative management with the states, including Alaska, and we have deep respect and admiration for our state agency professional colleagues. But there comes a time when the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service must stand up for the authorities and principles that underpin our work and say ‘no.’”

A convergence of different interests sometimes at odds with Ashe in the past are now joining him in calling for all wolf populations in the Lower 48 to be placed back under the blanket of federal protection until the full impacts of state laws can be scrutinized. Among those

rallying together: 200 indigenous tribes, a long list of distinguished scientists, the environmental law firm EarthJustice, the Sierra Club, Center for Biological Diversity, Humane Society of the United States, Defenders of Wildlife, National Parks Conservation Association, Project Coyote, Predator Defense, and others.

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Dating to the earliest decades of Yellowstone's history, wildlife experts realized the park was not large enough to accommodate the movements of animals that migrate seasonally between higher elevations in summer and valleys in winter to escape deep snows. Just as elk, bison, deer and other species have evolved to migrate, so, too, do wolves move seasonally with their prey base, especially prey that moves out of the mountains, says the eminent wolf researcher L. David Mech.

Mech, in a recent scientific paper in *Canadian Wildlife Biology & Management*, did not specifically allude to Yellowstone, though there are inferences to the park and the fact that wolves now face hard human-imposed lines where on one side they can be shot and the other where they are protected. Evidence shows that public attitudes toward wolves continue to shift and citizens are willing to give them more space to roam without constant hounding from people. He suggested potentially adding on adjacent federal wilderness areas on Forest Service lands to Yellowstone and Glacier as places where wolves aren't hunted. Doing so would protect wolf social structure and actually reduce conflict. Mech also references Idaho, saying that because it has no national parks where wolves are protected, it might consider classifying the Frank Church/River of No Return Wilderness Area or the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness as a wolf sanctuary. In two other papers that examine why wolves have been unsuccessful in inhabiting exurban areas, Mech writes: "Wolf survival in the long term requires large areas of extensive public lands." He adds, "Even though positive attitudes toward wolves generally predominates, primarily by urbanites, the animosity is personal and strong enough that it can often prevail."

Animosity can result in public policy that may, or may not, have any factual basis yet it is advanced nonetheless with righteousness. Cultural biases can trump the evidence of science, he has told *Mountain Journal*, but a culture without objective fact to guide it, and help citizens sort out what is true versus what is not, can result in public policy that steers away from common sense.





Indeed, wolves eat elk but most attempts at taking down healthy wapiti, as research shows, are unsuccessful. In recent years, wolves have also started turning their attention to bison. A huge benefit of wolves is that they, along with mountain lions and bears, helped to form a gauntlet that might be helpful in slowing the spread of Chronic Wasting Disease by killing infected animals. Photo courtesy Dan Stahler/NPS

For Dan Ashe, he says one important role for science is “to show there’s no science behind decisions being made. How this conflict gets reconciled in Montana is particularly important because it has been known for demonstrating value-based leadership in managing fish and wildlife. Idaho has always had a cold heart about wolves but Montana, until recently, has been different.”

Among the claims advanced by Fielder and others is that wolves are decimating big game herds and represent a major liability to the cattle and sheep industry. In areas immediately north of Yellowstone, there have been just three livestock depredation incidents in 10 years. Meanwhile, the size of the Northern Yellowstone Elk Herd, which moves between the park and Paradise Valley is rated by Fish Wildlife and Parks as being 21 percent over the desirable population objective. In fact, ranchers in the valley have expressed frustration that too many wapiti are showing up on their private pastures and eating haystacks reserved for cattle. They readily admit that having wolves around keeps elk on the move.

Wildlife disease experts also point out that having a healthy predator guide of wolves, mountain lions and bears represents a preventative cordon against the proliferation of Chronic Wasting Disease carried by elk, deer and moose. Wolves have a way of keying in on sick animals that might not appear infirmed to people.

During his tenure with Fish Wildlife and Parks as a senior manager, Flowers said the state enlisted Wildlife Services to help ranchers quickly respond to wolf predation. “That really worked and it seemed to me that a lot of the hate and discontent really subsided. Wolves became a more workable part of lands. The legislative action taken this year reverses years of progress. These crazy changes in the law allow for unethical means to take wolves and they are unnecessary.

In Idaho, where the level of rhetoric has been equally shrill, an author of legislation in that state that could, if played out, result in reducing the state’s wolf population 90 percent, claimed there are more than 1553 wolves. “They [wolves] are destroying ranchers. They’re destroying wildlife,” said state Sen. Mark Harris. Based on an objective analysis and

comparing Harris' words to fact, the assertion he made is untrue. Wolves are not destroying ranchers nor wildlife in any states where wolves live. The current elk population estimate in Montana is around 140,000, some 50,000 over the Fish Wildlife and Park's desired statewide objective. The vast majority of hunting units in Montana have elk numbers that are at or above, desired herd levels.

In 2018, the wolf population in Montana was estimated to number around 800. Lately, some lawmakers have been tossing around a statewide estimate of 1500 wolves, which critics say is inflated.

"You're trying to sweep away all the intent of my bill....This is not about fair chase; it's about reducing the wolf population." —Montana state legislator Paul Fielder

Still, at public information meeting earlier this summer, Fielder protested suggestions that Montana not use all of the aggressive means of killing wolves legalized in his bill and others. A man whose college education was in wildlife biology, he often seems out of touch with how thinking about the role of predators in ecosystems has evolved. He refused to yield any ground to those who wanted to ban the use of snares. "You're trying to sweep away all the intent [of my bill]," he said. "Snaring was intended to be in Montana. [Citizens] support trapping, and trapping was intended to be on public lands. This is not about fair chase; it's about reducing the wolf population."

It raises the question: if it's not about fair chase, then is it hunting, and if it's not hunting, then why is it being presented as such by the legislature, governor and state wildlife commission?

Byorth wonders about that, too. "We've got people in northwest Montana [who live in FWP Region 1] who hate wolves and now the legislature and the governor have pandered to them. They say, 'Now that we're killing the heck out of wolves there's going to miraculously be so many elk you can shoot them right off the road. Well, elk biology is more complicated than that. One of the big drivers is declining habitat. I would note that if you look at the numbers, the elk population is actually fairly stable in Region 1," he said.

At the Fish and Wildlife Commission meeting, one of the people driving the discussion was Pat Tabor who has no professional scientific credentials in wildlife management. Before he bought an outfitting business that offers horse trail rides in Glacier National Park and guides hunting trips into the Bob Marshall Wilderness, Tabor was an accountant in San Diego. Nonetheless, he has served on the Montana Board of Outfitters and president of the Montana Outfitters and Guides Associations—meaning both he and the industry he represents have vested interests in not only higher quotas for elk, but also aggressive hunting and trapping targets aimed at animals that might compete with hunters.

Things got heated at the meeting, with a representative of the Montana Trapper's Association saying his organization planned to start hosting public education events around to state to teach people how to set wolf snares. In 2019, 127 hunters took a single wolf, four archery hunters took one wolf, nine hunters took two wolves, three hunters took three wolves, one hunters took four wolves, and another took five.

With trappers, 43 took one wolf, 18 trappers took two wolves, seven trappers took three wolves, and five trappers took four wolves. That year, 18,154 total wolf licenses were sold, almost 16,000 to residents. The fee paid generated \$414,738 in license sales, resulting 282 wolves being harvested by residents and 11 by non-residents.

If a person is hunting without various kinds of aids, it can be difficult to take a wolf, which is why legislators added aids to enhance the arsenal.

In general, wolves can absorb huge losses—35 percent or more of a population annually—and still hold their own. Compared to grizzlies, they have high reproduction rates. What the mortality figure does not reflect, researchers say, is the trauma inflicted upon packs, which are really groups of extended family. Indiscriminate killing of wolves sews chaos in the social structure of a pack and can actually result in more wolves, in the short term, breeding and reproducing. It's similar with coyotes.

The federal government and state affiliates of a US Agriculture Department entity called Wildlife Services has been aggressive in swiftly moving to halt predation. In some instances, entire packs of a dozen or more wolves have been eliminated when only a few cattle or sheep have been killed—with the taxpayer-subsidized cost of killing the lobos being in excess of the value of the lost livestock.

Sholly's complaint that Montana has a fuzzy method for estimating wolf numbers is shared by scientists in Idaho and Montana who say wolf population estimates in those states are hardly based upon standard professional wildlife management techniques and the numbers are deliberately elevated to engender public support for killing more wolves.



Members of the occupying cavalry pose with a wolf pelt at Soda Butte patrol station in 1905. Within a quarter century, all wolves in Yellowstone would be eliminated, based on the false justification that eliminating "bad" predators is good for the ecosystem.

Tabor noted that if 450 wolves are killed by hunters and trappers in the coming months, then the state may readjust the allowable limit. Meanwhile, Marc Cooke with a group Wolves of the Rockies, was apoplectic and declared, "This is a declaration of a war on wolves. Make no mistake about it, it's going to decimate wolves in Montana." Wolves of the Rockies has offered rewards for people who step forward and provide information leading to the arrests of those responsible for poaching Yellowstone wolves in recent years.

Tabor insisted at the meeting that when it comes to ethics and morals, those are personal decisions, but, in fact, that interpretation does not jibe with ethics of fair chase spelled out by the Boone & Crockett Club.

NOTE: In the shared video below, a Wisconsin trapper makes a sincere effort to release a wolf that accidentally got caught in his coyote set. It illustrates why "bycatch"—i.e. catching animals that a trapper didn't try to catch—is an issue. And it's a graphic example that getting caught in a trap is not only painful for the animal but it has the potential to cause injury.

Bycatch is a threat for species like wolverines which might number as few as 250 in the entire Lower 48. Grizzlies and cubs are vulnerable, too, for bears living just beyond the recovery zone. In addition, wolf watchers say it would be an unfitting end for a Yellowstone wolf outside the park.

Timber Wolf Release by John Oens 2015 HD

In Helena, it is Greg Lemon's job as spokesman for Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks to explain and defend the wildlife management actions the department is ordered to carry out.

"The will of the wildlife commission today is different from the will of the commission that approved wolf quotas a few years ago," he said. Lemon made clear that he believes Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, as a department, acts in its public trust responsibilities to provide good science and to implement directives—in this case legislation passed by the legislature, signed into law by the governor and then handed down to the department. Prior to the last Fish and Wildlife Commission meeting, he said, the department presented that body with a range of choices.

Commissioner Byorth said his colleagues embraced a package that represents the most extreme anti-wolf options, including removing wolf-kill quotas in districts on the border of Yellowstone. He asserted that the commission is now promoting wolf-killing methods that previous commissions, under both Democrats and Republicans would have handily rejected.

To say, on the one hand, that it's ethically repugnant to bait for black bears in Montana, yet now allow it to happen with wolves; or use high-powered spotlights to kill wolves at night yet reject it for pursuing elk; or allow the setting of snares to kill an animal for no good reason other than personal hatred, demeans the sport of hunting, he said.

Lemon wouldn't comment on that assertion. "My job is to help implement the laws and regulations that are passed by the legislature and the commission. How we as individual employees feel about it personally in the department isn't relevant to asking whether or not

those laws should be implemented,” he said. “If the commission makes certain practices legal, that’s their purview.”

Byorth responded to that by quoting Aldo Leopold who wrote: “Ethical behavior is doing the right thing when no one else is watching—even when doing the wrong thing is legal.”

“What happened in Montana in 2021 with regard to wolves? Why have we regressed when it comes to professional, science-based wildlife management? That’s the \$150,000 question,” Byorth said. “I remember Dave Mech once saying that he expected a backlash to wolf reintroduction to be severe, but brief. And it kind of was. It went away but it has returned. What we have now is so irrational, so inflammatory.”

“What’s happening in the West now with wolves is just pure cruelty,” Dan Ashe says. “People who claimed to have good intentions worked together to try and secure a place for wolves on the landscape and then, as soon as they saw an opportunity, they walked away from their good faith commitment. It’s a monument to where we are today. There is no middle ground. We’ve known since Aldo Leopold wrote *A Sand County Almanac* in the 1940s that decimating predators is not wildlife management. It’s the opposite.” He added, “As this wolf saga plays out, my concern as a hunter is that generations, a new generation of Americans, is going to see hunting as something that is abhorrent. The stigma is going to stick, and unless there are voices condemning it, the reputation will be deserved.”

Former Yellowstone Supt. Finley said the Biden Administration needs to rethink its recent refusal to emergency re-list wolves under the Endangered Species Act given the hostile policies prevailing in Montana, Idaho and Wisconsin—the same attitudes ironically that resulted in wolves having to receive federal protection in the 1960s.

“I think Dan Ashe, former director of the Fish and Wildlife Service, is right. He said his own former agency is negligent in allowing a state to carry out this kind of wolf management,” said Finley who, notably, is a recent former chair of the Oregon Fish and Game Commission and dealt with wolves recolonizing that Pacific Northwest state.

"I would assert that if Gov. Gianforte says he doesn't care what people from outside Montana think [about wolves], then maybe it's time for him to think

about all the money that gets generated for his state from visitors who love wildlife. And maybe the best way to get him to understand is for visitors who come to Yellowstone and appreciate the value of healthy wolf populations to boycott his state. Cancel conferences in Montana. Take your vacation dollars elsewhere.” —Former Yellowstone Supt. Mike Finley

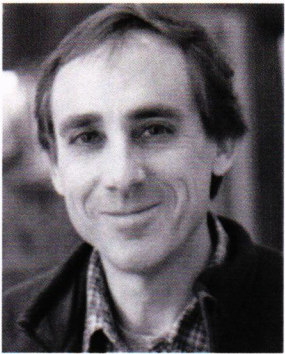
“Furthermore, I would assert that if Gov. Gianforte says he doesn’t care what people from outside Montana think [about wolves], then maybe it’s time for him to think about all the money that gets generated for his state from visitors who love wildlife. And maybe the best way to get him to understand is for visitors who come to Yellowstone and appreciate the value of healthy wolf populations to boycott his state. Cancel conferences in Montana. Take your vacation dollars elsewhere. Get tourists to vote with their wallets which tells the governor they refuse to further this kind of behavior. That would get his attention.”

He noted that in the early 1990s after the Alaska Game Board authorized the aerial gunning of hundreds of wolves, and its intent to reduce wolf populations in some areas by 80 percent, allegedly to bolster moose and caribou numbers, then Gov. Walter J. Hickel rescinded the plan when a national uproar ensued. Tourists threatened to cancel their stays at guest lodges and avoid Alaska as a destination.

Hickel even alluded to the fact that Alaska’s zealous anti-wolf policy reflected poorly on the state. “We cannot consider wildlife management policies independent of public and political perceptions. The national view of our stewardship in Alaska will continue to impact our ability to develop all of our resources,” **he wrote in a statement.**

“Montana and Idaho do not have to take these extreme measures because there’s just not the evidence that supports their necessity,” Finley said. “Here in Oregon, the state works with stockgrowers and actually requires cattle and sheep ranchers to take non-lethal action first.”

When Finley was told that just three wolf depredation incidents on livestock had happened in hunting districts 313 and 316 next to Yellowstone, he said, “Well, those stats prove my point. Why would you allow unlimited taking or even aggressive taking of Yellowstone wolves in those districts if the limited quota of one wolf per district has worked? But more to the point, why would any governor want to willingly portray himself as being a poor neighbor and a villain to Yellowstone? That script doesn’t play well with the public and the PR nightmare that it’s going to cause will not end well for him or the reputation of his state.”



About **Todd Wilkinson**

Todd Wilkinson, founder of *Mountain Journal*, is an American author and journalist proudly trained in the old school tradition. He's been a journalist for 35 years and writes for publications ranging from *National Geographic* to *The Guardian*. He is author of several books on topics ranging from scientific whistleblowers

to Ted Turner and the story of Jackson Hole grizzly mother 399, the most famous bear in the world which features photographs by Thomas Mangelsen. For more information on Wilkinson, [click here](#). (Photo by David J Swift).

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